By The Library Door

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by rottenpumpkin13

Summary

Zack and Genesis meet again after that day in the Nibel Reactor—except this time, no swords are out, Genesis' heart is on a platter, and Zack is exhausted enough to listen to him. Neither of them know that on the other side of the library door, Sephiroth has put his books down and is listening intently.

The moon cast a pale, blue glow over Nibelheim that evening. In the shadow of the mountains, only the dim glow of yellow lamps illuminated the quiet town. The Shinra mansion was no exception, with a haunting light penetrating the cracked windows and casting shadows on the ground outside.

Zack was alone by the library door, a solitary figure at the end of the hallways utterly incapable of standing still. Anxiety permeated his body, forcing him to bounce on his feet.

The floorboards creaked as he shifted his weight rapidly between his feet. His face reflected a maelstrom of emotions lingering beneath the surface—desperation, frustration, and an unshakable fear of what lay beyond the locked door.

He raised a gloved hand, aiming a knock, but ultimately letting his fist fall free with a grim sigh.

"Sephiroth," he called out. The name hung in the air, a plea that he hoped would echo through the cracks in the door. "Come out, please. We need to talk."

Silence answered him, broken only by the distant Nibel wolf howls beyond the mansion’s walls.

The memories of what had transpired at the reactor haunted him like incessant phantoms. Zack's heart ached for the man, once a figure he looked up to—who he still looked up to—now lost to Shiv’a-knows-what in that library.

Zack pressed his forehead against the cold wood, letting his heavy eyelids flutter shut just for a moment.

"Don't shut me out. Please?”

The soft echo of footsteps reached Zack's ears. He unglued himself from the door as if it was engulfed in flames, a glimmer of hope lighting up his eyes.

But as his head snapped towards the other end of the hallway, his shoulders slumped.

Genesis looked stunned as he froze in place. His usual air of arrogance faltered, replaced by a genuine confusion. He had retracted his wing, and now looked significantly smaller, as Zack noticed.

Their eyes locked in a moment of shared surprise.

But as Genesis approached, pure anger threaded itself around Zack's legs. He took an accusing step forward.

"What are you doing here, Genesis?" He spat.

Genesis raised an eyebrow, his lips parting with no words escaping past. He jerked one shoulder.

“I've come to apologize.”

Zack's exhaustion was visibly etched into the lines of his face as he glared at the man.

“Apologize? Apologize to who? Because I don't need anything from you, and Sephiroth won't even come out to drink water, let alone hear whatever you have to say.” He turned back to the door. “God knows he's had enough of that.”

Genesis took a step forward with a wounded expression. "Zack—"

Zack cut him off sharply. "Do you know where you could shove that apology?"

Genesis raised an eyebrow. "Oh, do go on. This should be good."

For a moment, Zack hesitated, letting the anger subside. There was no need to be crass, not when screaming and thrashing was all he wanted to do.

"Do you really think apologizing will convince Sephiroth to help you?" He asked quietly.

"I'm not here for that. I've realized the weight of my words that day," Genesis admitted, his voice carrying a rare sincerity.

Zack's eyes narrowed, skepticism etched across his face. "And where was this realization when you killed your parents?"

"I didn't kill my parents!" Genesis replied quickly—and defensively. "Sure, they were lying traitors, but that their death wasn't my revenge. The clones got to them first when I went back to Banora."

Zack turned around sharply. "To do what, Genesis? What were you doing in Banora? Were you planning on hosting a Loveless reading that just so happened to turn into a massacre?"

"I was angry and in pain." Genesis' voice was strained.

"I'm angry! I'm in pain! You don't see me going out there and bombing Nibelheim, do you?" Zack shot back, his frustration boiling over.

The courtyard seemed to shrink as the intensity of their exchange heightened. The shadows clung to the stone walls of the Shinra Mansion, bearing witness to the clash of emotions between two warriors with a shared past. The air crackled with unspoken resentment, and the weight of their words lingered in the silence that followed, a stark reminder of the wounds that time had failed to heal.

Genesis's defense crumbled as Zack confronted him with accusations, each one a painful reminder of their complicated past.

"This degradation messes with your mind," Genesis reasoned, trying to explain the turmoil within.

"But your mind is all clear and good when you need to play nice to get Sephiroth to give you his cells, huh?" Zack retorted, his bitterness cutting through.

"I could care less about saving myself now," Genesis declared, his tone

carrying a sense of resignation.

A heavy silence began to settle between them, but was broken by Genesis' inability to remain quiet for more than one minute.

“I just want to make peace with the world before I pass,” he said. “Despite our differences, Sephiroth has always been my friend.” A pause. “I knew about his position with his mother, and I so cruelly lashed out and mocked him for it."

Zack's gaze softened for exactly one second—and no longer than that. "You have more things to be sorry for."

"I'm aware.”

"Angeal," Zack said, tasting the pain in his mentor’s name.

"His death was entirely his choice," Genesis defended.

Zack brushed it off. "Banora.”

"Regret will follow me to my grave as will my reasons," Genesis said coolly.

"Using Loveless as a justification for your corrupt actions," Zack said, his frustration resurfacing.

"Hang on—"

"And now making Sephiroth waste away in there," Zack said finally. He crossed his arms, enjoying the way Genesis' lips quirked into a thin line. He waited for him to say something, anything that would give him the opportunity to lash out.

But nothing came. Genesis was completely at a loss for words.

Genesis looked down. Zack noted how his demeanor was marked by shame and self-reflection—either that or he was an incredibly convincing actor. Zack decided to buy himself some piece of mind and interpret the man's dejection as the former.

Zack let out a sigh, letting his roll before they fluttered shut.

"I guess it takes a lot of guts to come back here, considering how massive your ego is."

Genesis looked up, a touch of surprise on his face. He opened his mouth to reply, but nothing grazed his tongue.

Zack flinched when Genesis took a step forward, his hand instinctively jerking upward, ready to free the buster sword from its magnet.

But Genesis lowered himself to the floor, taking a seat against the library door.

Surprise crossed Zack's features as he noticed just how vulnerable the man was. Had he been any wiser, he'd killed Genesis then and there, putting an end to everything the man had put them through.

But Zack's unwavering optimism got the better of him, as it always did. He exhaled sharply through his nose, gently taking a few steps forward and sitting beside him

"All I ever wanted was to help you, you know," Zack grumbled, his voice carrying a hint of offense.

Genesis hmmed in response, a subdued acknowledgment of the truth. "There is no helping me, Zack."

The flickering lights above cast a honeyed glow to the incomprehensible scene. Zack counted the moths flapping clumsily under the glare—four.

"You don't know that," he replied. "There's got to be another way. A cure, even."

Genesis' chuckle was dry. "Even if there was, I don't have another decade to squander searching for it."

Zack couldn't help but smile, a flicker of his unwavering optimism in his eyes. "Too much honor, not enough dreams."

"Monsters have neither dreams nor honor," Genesis replied automatically.

"You're not a monster; you're SOLDIER," Zack countered.

"I doubt I deserve that title, even if I *did* work hard for it. When you're born a monster, you meet your end as a monster."

Zack didn't take kindly to Genesis' sense of fatalism.

"Do you think that about Sephiroth?"

Genesis jerked one shoulder—the seemingly infected one—that made Zack wonder if it was a pain reflex.

"Believe me, when I found out about the Jenova project, I was overjoyed. I finally had something over Sephiroth, a knife with which to stab him and knock him off his throne." The bitterness of their rivalry was still fresh in his tone.

Zack huffed in response.

"And then... I was satisfied. I was calm. I realized that we had always been the same, equals, all of us, all children of a corrupt experiment forced to serve Shinra."

Zack considered his words.

"I really *was* asking him to join me. It wasn't simply a ploy to get his cells," Genesis continued, his gaze distant, as if reliving the moment.

"And what would you do if he accepted?"

Genesis turned his head, meeting Zack in a shared look.

"Destroy Shinra and make sure that what happened to me *, to us* , never happens again. Revenge, if you will."

Zack nodded, letting Genesis' words sink into his understanding and sort themselves out. “And then take over the world?"

There was a pause before Genesis doubled over laughing. Zack wasn't sure he had ever heard a genuine reaction sound from the man. Genesis' laugh; his real laugh, Zack noted, was messy and loud.

"I never dreamed that high,” Genesis let his own amusement fade, clearing his throat. “In fact, my only dream ever was to find the true gift of the goddess, to be worthy of being bequeathed such a gift.”

Zack’s eyebrows flashed. "And what *is* the gift?"

Genesis leaned back against the door, his eyes fixed on the wall in front of them. "Everyone has their own, so it's up to personal interpretation, as is the entirety of Loveless. Some may find their gift in joy, others hope, some in family and connections."

Zack's curiosity lingered in the space between them. "And you...?"

A moment of contemplative silence followed. "I'm still searching, which is a gift in itself. Maybe I'll find it in redemption, or perhaps I'm fated to remain forever unsatisfied, forever a curious soul unworthy of its significance.”

“ *Or* you're overdramatic,” Zack muttered.

Genesis cast him a wry look before continuing.

"I thought it was a pure S-cell, the one thing I needed to live. But after much deliberation, I realize I had been wrong all along,"

Zack wanted to ask him what led to his change of heart, or perhaps even dig into personal inquiries and demand to know what dormant feelings awoke for the man to even be here.

But instead, his mind, racing a mile a minute and still pushing the gas pedal, settled on a random thought.

"I think it'd be cool to have a wing, though."

Genesis raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Really."

Zack was taken aback by his own comment, but nodded.

"Yeah…” He shifted, turning his body to face Genesis. “Hey, did you know how to fly immediately or did it take practice?"

To anyone who lacked context, it would've looked like a lovely discussion between old friends. And to anyone who knew Genesis, it would've come as a shock to see how easily he sunk into comfort around Zack.

"It came as a natural skill," Genesis asserted, his air of confidence returning like a sudden gust of wind.

Zack called his bluff with a simple, skeptical look.

It might as well have acted as a needle popping the other's ego.

"I crashed into a tree once," Genesis admitted.

Zack burst into laughter, and surprisingly, Genesis joined in.

It echoed through the hallway, a shared moment of camaraderie amidst the weight of their past grievances.

Then, unexpectedly, soft giggling reached their ears from the other side of the door.

The laughter gradually faded, and Zack and Genesis exchanged a puzzled look.

As realization dawned, they fell silent, both turning their attention to the closed door.

A sly smile played on Genesis's lips as he looked at Zack, and together, they shared a knowing glance.

Genesis cleared his throat.

"There is no hate, only joy, for you are beloved by the goddess, hero of the dawn, healer of worlds."

There was a pause where Zack and Genesis held their breath.

"Act three," Sephiroth's muffled voice sounded from the other side.

While Zack breathed a sigh of relief, Genesis broke into a grin.

"It's Act *Two* . You're rusty, my friend," Genesis corrected with a hint of amusement in his voice.

There was a subtle shuffling sound from the other side. The pair took it as Sephiroth getting up to—hopefully—open the door. They too scrambled to their feet, just in time for the door to swing open.

Dust and the strong scent of old books assaulted their noses as it revealed Sephiroth.

It took every shred of composure in Zack's body to keep him from breaking down then and there.

Sephiroth, usually an epitome of strength and composure, stood before them with dark circles under his eyes, his frame thin and frail after days of neglecting food.

His haggard appearance and trembling form spoke volumes about the toll of his seclusion.

Zack broke the tension. "Were we loud enough to distract you?"

Sephiroth paused, turning his head to gaze upon a nearby stack of books. "If... if that was your plan, then yes, somehow." His voice barely came as a whisper.

Genesis didn't waste a minute. "And I take it you heard everything I said?" He asked tentatively.

Sephiroth nodded, his expression unreadable—to Genesis' chagrin. But then his lips quirked, cracking into a minuscule smile that stretched his skin.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day. The Genesis Rhapsodos apologizing," Sephiroth remarked.

Zack held his breath as he watched Genesis step forward. Wordlessly, he pulled Sephiroth into a gentle hug, his arms wrapped around the once unshakable warrior who now looked so frail. Genesis rubbed comforting circles on Sephiroth's back, smoothing his hair in a soothing gesture.

"I didn't mean to—I thought it would've been a wakeup call," Genesis stuttered, his voice shaking and heavily wrought with remorse.

Zack half expected Sephiroth to push him away, and began to wonder if the man even had the strength to do so. But then he watched Sephiroth slowly raise his hand, gently wrapping it around Genesis'

elbow as he pulled him away.

He glanced at the stack of books again. "It doesn't matter now. You told no lies."

Zack stepped towards him. "How are you feeling now...? Will you come out?"

Sephiroth's response was heavy with the weight of his internal turmoil. "My entire existence has been a lie. I'm angry. I want to..."

"Torch the entire world and then yourself?" Genesis finished for him. "Been there."

"And literally done that," Zack added, side-eyeing Genesis. "I get that you're angry right now, Seph, but you're not in the right state of mind to take action. This is gonna take time to process, and when your mind is clear, then we can decide what to do. Whatever that may be."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "We?"

Zack nodded. "Yeah, we. You're not alone in this. We've been through a lot together, and we'll figure it out, whatever 'it' is."

Genesis echoed the sentiment. "I can say the same, if you'll allow me to stay, that is."

Sephiroth hesitated. "I'm confused, I don't know... I'm just angry, I want to—"

Sephiroth's stomach inconveniently chose *that* moment to loudly voice its protest with a growl—a loud one.

The unexpected interruption brought a moment of levity to the heavy atmosphere.

Genesis smirked, crossing his arms. “Devour an entire plate of Pasta Pescatore, if I still know you well enough.”

Zack sighed, fighting the urge to tease Sephiroth.

"You're hungry. You haven't eaten or slept properly since this whole fiasco started. We can get you food, then get you into bed for a month, and then we can decide what to do."

Sephiroth felt the tug of Jenova waning on his mind, her influence slipping away.

At that moment, he had a choice to make, and he listened to the stronger, more caring voice—Zack.

"Alright," Sephiroth conceded after a sizable pause.

Zack and Genesis supported Sephiroth, each taking an arm, as they guided him with careful steps, mindful of his weakened state.

The Shinra Mansion's stairs loomed ahead, a symbolic descent from the crescendo they had risen to.

Genesis hummed critically. "Puppy, you do know this man may still be liable to burn the world to the ground when he's better, right?"

Zack scratched the back of his head with his free hand. "Yeah, yeah, I'm aware…" A lightbulb lit up over his head. “Hey, If push comes to shove, we sit on him!”

Genesis considered. "We can tie his hair to a lamp post."

Sephiroth frowned, arching an unamused eyebrow.

"I'm well enough to understand you both,” he said dryly.

The trio slowly descended the stairs, disappearing down into the ground level and *far away* from the library.

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